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ABSTRACT

This speech discusses criteria for hiring, evaluating, and rehiring or discharging superintendents by school boards. The presentation stresses that most board evaluation methods are weak and suggests a superintendent evaluation checklist such as the one used by the Fort Worth Board of Education as a workable remedy. (JF)

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Your Superintendent--Recharge or Discharge?

Loyd L. Turner

President, Fort Worth Board of Education

(Speech delivered at the annual convention of the National School Boards Association, Philadelphia Civic Center, April 5 and 6, 1971)

It's a pleasure to be back in Philadelphia. I say back because long ago I spent nearly three years here as an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, and it was here that I met the young lady who became my wife. With this long and direct association with the City of Brotherly Love, I cannot agree with W. C. Fields' left-handed compliment of it. He is reported to have suggested that his epitaph be "On the whole, I would rather be in Philadelphia." (I hope that you people haven't found the city all that dead.)

Because Philadelphia is noted for its lawyers--I'm sure that all of you have heard references to Philadelphia lawyers--I cannot resist telling you about a recent letter which the Texas Association of School Boards received from a small school district in South Texas. The association's executive director asked me, as a vice president of the association, to draft an answer. Here's the letter:

> Dear Sir:
>
> We have an interesting problem regarding continuing membership on our board. One of our board members sold his home and moved to another community and submitted his resignation. But he changed his mind about the move and came back to town before the board had accepted his resignation. We thought that we would retain him as a member of the board by refusing to accept his resignation. Our attorney told us we couldn't do that. The board then said that it would accept his resignation and then reappoint him to fulfill his own unexpired term. The attorney said the board couldn't legally do this because the man couldn't meet

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the six-months residency requirement. What do you recommend?

My answer: We recommend that your school system hire a new attorney.

We are not here this morning, however, to discuss a legal subject. Our topic is "Your Superintendent: Recharge or Discharge?" It's a lively one, and it's timely. And it's right in line with those two current catchwords in education--relevancy and involvement. If you don't believe it, you've never hired or fired a superintendent.

The title of this clinic being what it is, I assume that all of you board members are attending it because you're unhappy with your present superintendent, or wondering about him, or thinking about trading him in on a new model. I assume that all of the superintendents in the audience are not quite sure how they stand with their boards--or perhaps they are sure but wish it weren't so.

With your permission, then, I'll broaden the title to include all superintendents--good, bad, and indifferent. These days, a superintendent's lot is not a happy one; so we should not add to his problems by implying that, willy-nilly, he should be either recharged or discharged.

As an indication of how tough a superintendent's job is, consider their turnover rate in the last few years. The public has apparently declared open season on school superintendents and college presidents. Do you have any idea of the turnover rate for superintendents in the 50 largest cities in the nation? It's high. Specifically, 21 of these 50 school systems have acquired new superintendents in the past two years. Or bringing the matter still closer to home, four years ago Fort Worth had the newest superintendent in the business. Our school board had just hired him. Since then, 34 of the superintendents in those 50 largest cities have been replaced, for one reason or another. Although our superintendent has been on the job for only four years, he has been there

longer than two out of three superintendents in the nation's largest cities.

All of these 34 superintendents were not discharged; in fact, only a few of them were. Some probably died; some probably retired; some probably received better offers from other school systems; some probably accepted professorial or administrative posts with colleges or universities; and some probably took positions with private foundations or with state or federal agencies.

As a matter of fact, in these rapidly changing times, superintendents in many large cities apparently expect to stay in one place for a maximum of five years. This may be because they know it's hard to hit a moving target. For whatever reason, this mobility has brought a change in board-superintendent relationships. In the first place, there is no way that these highly mobile superintendents can develop as much loyalty to the pupils and to the communities as did their predecessors who served longer tours of duty. In the second place, this new-found mobility tends to make some of these superintendents as independent as a hog on ice, if you'll pardon a homely Southwestern simile.

At the other extreme are those school systems--and there are many of them--who hang on to their superintendents as if the supply were running short. Many school systems still grow their own superintendents. Their problem is inbreeding rather than itinerant superintendents who are just passing through.

Whether home-grown or imported, whether in urban school districts or rural school districts, superintendents should be evaluated by the board of education on more than just a hit-or-miss basis. In my opinion superintendents should be evaluated annually. That's what this clinic is all about.

A board of education has numerous responsibilities, but there are probably none more important than these two: setting the right policies and hiring the right superintendent to carry out those policies. <u>If a board hires the right</u>

superintendent, the battle to achieve an excellent school system is half won. If a board hires the wrong superintendent, it has lost not only the battle but the whole war.

It is unfortunate that board members have little or no experience and practically no instruction in selecting a superintendent--one of their most important responsibilities. As a matter of fact, most board members come and go before the superintendent does, and thus they never have an opportunity to exercise this important responsibility. As far as board members are concerned, with reference to this particular responsibility, it's like being a parent. By the time you're experienced, you're no longer employable.

All board members, however, do have an opportunity--and it happens every Spring--to evaluate the performance of their superintendent. This is so regardless of whether they hire him or whether they found him there when they were elected or appointed.

(I might add, parenthetically, that I had served on the Fort Worth Board of Education for several months before I realized that some boards are appointed and some boards are paid. In Los Angeles, for example, board members are paid $75 per meeting. As might be expected, they meet all the time.)

Of all the responsibilities with which school boards are charged, evaluation is the one that they handle most poorly. This observation--based upon 12 years of experiencing the agony and the ecstasy of school board service--applies not only to the evaluation of the superintendent but to the evaluation of everything in the school system from the curriculum on up or down or sideways.

There are several reasons for this. One reason is that school superintendents, by and large, are rarely interested in doing any more evaluation than necessary. They are not likely to bring up the subject unless the board does. Why? Because evaluations may lead to comparisons with other school districts,

and this is the last thing that superintendents want. This fear of comparison is one of the reasons why school administrators took such a poor view of National Assessment of Educational Progress in the late 1960's and insisted on watering it down so that the accomplishments of individual school districts and the various states will not be released. Data will now be published only in terms of large groups of individuals located within four geographic regions. For similar reasons, many superintendents--and other school administrators and teachers, too--are now shying away from the concept of accountability. This concept, which may revolutionize the nation's schools by the end of the decade, means that schools will be judged by how they perform, not by what they promise.

Another reason why boards generally fall short in evaluating is that they don't have the time or the expertise to do the evaluating themselves and their school budgets may not have enough leeway for them to hire outside firms. As it was in the beginning, is now--but hopefully will not always be--school boards are largely dependent upon the superintendent for information upon which to base decisions--including the decision about how well the school system is really performing.

Still another reason why boards rarely win any prizes for evaluation is that evaluation is hard work, and it certainly doesn't increase their popularity.

Conscientious board members, however, will not neglect their responsibility to evaluate, on some orderly basis, the performance of major elements of their school system, beginning with the superintendent.

After all, evaluation of the superintendent has been a prime responsibility of school boards ever since they were invented. School boards began as watch-dog committees to make sure that the schoolmasters' religious beliefs were orthodox.

Moving from the general to the specific, I would like to tell you how our board handles the evaluation of our superintendent. We don't claim that this

is the world's greatest method. We do claim that this method is effective. And we assume that it was primarily because of this method--plus the new-type contract with our superintendent--that I was invited by the National School Boards Association to be the speaker at this particular clinic.

On July 1, 1970, our board placed the superintendent of schools--as well as the deputy superintendent and all four assistant superintendents--on three-year contracts calling for the board to evaluate his performance each year. Following the evaluation, the board will decide whether to extend his contract one year and whether to grant a salary increase.

If the board decides to extend the contract, the superintendent will be employed under a three-year contract, as he was the year before. If the board declines to do so, he will have two years remaining on his contract, during which time he may improve his performance, find himself another position, or retire.

Several school systems across the country have this type of contract with their superintendents. What is unusual in Fort Worth is the application of this type of contract to all six of the top administrators in our school system. It injects a touch of the free-enterprise system into our school system at the top.

If the board declines to extend the superintendent's contract--or the contract of one of the other top administrators--this will get his attention and will inspire him to do better or move on within two years. To put the matter plainly, he will have to shape up or ship out.

None of the top administrators will receive salary increases just because they live another year--which was formerly the practice in our school system and is still the practice in far too many school systems.

The contracts require that all of the administrators take annual physical

examinations and provide copies of the physicians' reports at the time of the board's annual evaluation session.

To protect the superintendent and the other administrators, the contracts state that if the board fails to act on the extension or revision of a contract before April 1 of any year, the contract will be automatically extended for one additional year.

This type of contract, in our opinion, benefits the administrators, the board, and the school system.

It lets the superintendent and the other administrators know where they stand; and they will never come to the end of a contract with no inkling that it isn't going to be renewed. And this contract forces the board to perform its evaluative function, which many boards do very reluctantly or very infrequently or not at all.

How do we handle the actual evaluation of our superintendent? How do we decide whether to reward him, recharge him, or discharge him? The answer to that lies in a list of the qualifications which we think our superintendent should have.

Four years ago when we were in the market for a superintendent, we drew up a list of the qualifications which we were seeking in a superintendent. We conducted a nationwide search, received 88 applications from 28 states, and personally interviewed four of these applicants before selecting the superintendent whom we considered to be best for our school system.

When the board makes its annual evaluation of the superintendent--as is required by the new contract--we use the list of qualifications which we were seeking to find in a superintendent. That's what we were looking for; what did we get?

Our board listed 21 qualifications which we felt that a superintendent of schools should have in order to lead our school system during the late 1960's and the early 1970's. Note that this is a list drawn up for the Fort Worth Public Schools for this particular time period. We doubt that this is the exact list of qualifications which the superintendent in your school system should have. We firmly believe, however, that before you can conduct any meaningful evaluation of your superintendent, your board should draw up a similar list that does fit your school system. And you should do it in conjunction with your present superintendent, if you have one. It is only fair that a superintendent know beforehand the criteria against which he will be judged.

I won't go into the list of qualifications which our board uses--they will be available along with summaries of the speech at the conclusion of this clinic--other than to mention that they range from "excellent health" and "high morals" to "unquestioned courage" and "ability to make decisions and face controversy."

The board meets annually for the sole purpose of conducting this evaluation and to discuss the superintendent's evaluation of his deputy and assistant superintendents.

To make the evaluation as objective as possible--considering that seven individuals are making personal judgments about an eighth--we ask each board member to rate the superintendent on each of the 21 qualifications, giving him a grade of A, B, C, D, or F on each qualification. The board member merely circles the proper letters; he doesn't sign his name. We then plot the results on a graph. This gives us a composite board's-eye view of the superintendent. This completed graph clearly shows how the performance of the

superintendent during the past year looks to the board as a whole--not to the president, not to any individual board member--but to the board as a whole.

Based upon this composite picture of the superintendent's performance, the board then discusses whether his contract should be extended an additional year and whether he should receive a salary increase.

If the graph of the superintendent's performance fluctuates between grades A and B, our board feels that he has earned a reward--either a one-year extension of his contract, or a salary increase, or both. Last year he got both. This year he received a contract extension. We were completely satisfied with his performance--that's why we extended his contract--but because of a sizable salary increase last year and because of the current economic climate in Fort Worth, we let his salary remain where it was. (I might add parenthetically that since we have hired him as superintendent, he has twice been elected chairman of the board of directors of the National Academy for School Executives, indicating the high esteem in which he is held by fellow superintendents and verifying our board's evaluation of his ability.)

If an overall grade between A and B is the "reward" zone on our performance graph, then an overall grade between B and D falls into the "recharge" zone, at least with our board. In our school system, a superintendent who fell into this B-to-D zone would not receive an extension of his contract, and he would not receive a salary increase. He would be put on notice that he would have to do better, and the board would point out the areas in which it expected him to do better. We would certainly consider him salvageable. (As a matter of fact, a majority of superintendents in the United States might possibly fall into this B-to-D zone, if their boards plotted them on this particular performance graph.)

Some school board members might consider a C as acceptable performance, and they might feel that their superintendent doesn't need to be "recharged." That is their privilege and that is their school system--and may God help it!

If the graph of a superintendent's performance fluctuates between D and F on the chart, he is in the "discharge" zone. You're late already. In our school system, we would not consider such a superintendent salvageable. We would like to stay in the education business--not the salvage business.

At our board's annual evaluation session, after we have plotted the superintendent's performance on a graph--and have made a duplicate copy for the board president's files--and after we have agreed as to whether there will be a contract extension and/or a salary increase, we invite the superintendent to join us. We give him a copy of the performance graph, discuss it with him, and answer any questions which he may have about the board's evaluation of his performance during the past year.

Individual board members then mention any performance-related matters which have not been covered by the 21-item graph. This matter may be either good or bad. Occasionally it is something that "bugs" only one board member; and the superintendent attaches as much weight to it as the circumstances warrant and as his good judgment dictates.

Once the board members have made their individual comments about any phase of the superintendent's performance, the superintendent is free to discuss the board's performance, either collectively or individually, offering suggestions as to how the board might handle its duties and responsibilities better during the coming year.

I know that some of you feel that under these circumstances, the superintendent's remarks would necessarily be very circumspect. This is true to an extent--we didn't hire any dummy as a superintendent. But you might be

surprised at how candid a superintendent can be when he has just been scuffed around for an hour or more by seven board members and when he has been invited to return their fire. Bear in mind, too, that one of the qualifications upon which our board rates our superintendent is "unquestioned courage, integrity, and honesty." This gives him a golden opportunity to prove it.

For example, the superintendent may point out that a board member has been strongly suggesting to him, outside of a personnel session, a personnel appointment of some kind. This is contrary to our board's policy. By informing the board of the incident, the superintendent is educating new board members and subtly slapping the wrist of the one who erred.

In my opinion, if the members of your board and your superintendent talk the same language and have mutual respect for each other, you can have a no-holds-barred, hair-down evaluation session that will be beneficial to all concerned. What's more, it will be beneficial to the school system which both board and superintendent are interested in improving.

If you don't have this sort of working relationship with your superintendent, it will show if and when your board members plot his performance on a graph, as discussed a few moments ago. Further, without a close working relationship with your superintendent--a relationship that does not place too much emphasis on the "prerogatives" of board members vis-a-vis the superintendent--your school system is likely headed for trouble.

Superintendents quit or get fired for other reasons besides unsatisfactory performance. Chief among these, I'm sure, are a loss of mutual respect, a realization that the board and the superintendent can no longer work together as a team for the good of the school system, personality clashes, and hangups over the difference between policy and administration.

(I might add here that when I was a fledgling board member, I used to attend state and national conferences where the line between board policy and school administration were discussed. I never saw anybody who could draw that line, and in recent years I'm happy to hear less talk about it. Show me a superintendent who says that he never gets involved in policy and that his school board never gets involved in administration, and I'll show you a superintendent who rates F on our performance graph under the column marked "honesty.")

We'll never get there from here if we adopt the cavalier attitude of a school board which will remain nameless. This being a small school system, the board president was interviewing an applicant for a job. (This board president had never even heard there is a line between policy and administration.)

"I majored in science," the young man said.

"Don't need any science teachers," the board president replied.

"I minored in English."

"We just hired an English teacher."

"How about physical education? I lettered in three sports in college," the yound man said with a touch of desperation.

The board president explained that the school system was knee-deep in physical education teachers.

At the end of his patience and his qualifications, the applicant muttered, "Well, I'll be an S.O.B."

"Why didn't you say so?" the board president asked. "We're looking for a superintendent."

If the great American dream about public education is ever to become a reality--the dream that every boy and girl will have the opportunity to be educated to his maximum potential--it is vitally important that our school

systems be headed by the best superintendents possible.

A board is shirking its responsibility if it doesn't hire a good superintendent.

A board is shirking its responsibility if it doesn't evaluate a superintendent's performance on a regular basis.

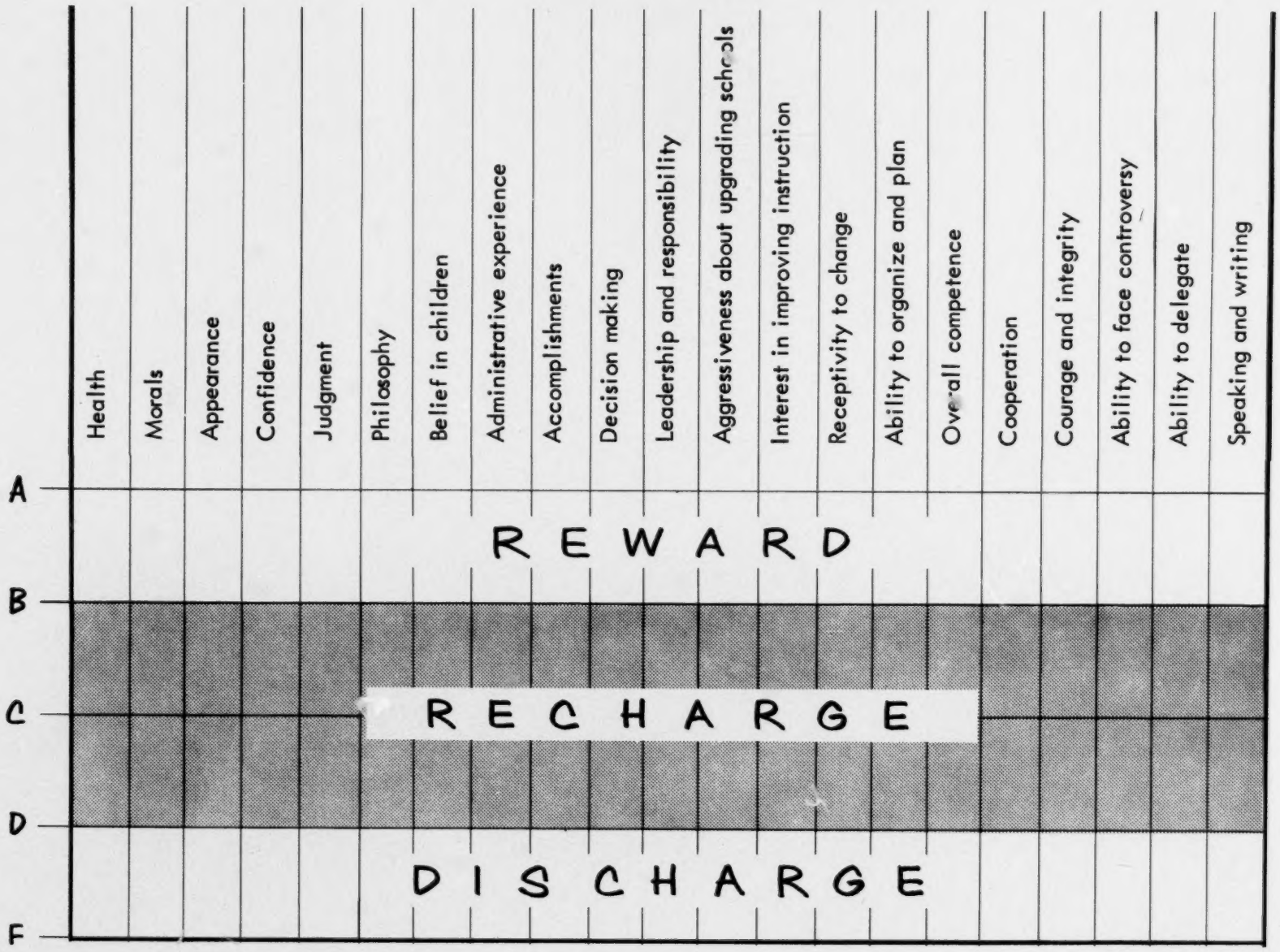
A board is shirking its responsibility to the public and the school system if it doesn't reward a superintendent who merits it, if it doesn't recharge a superintendent who needs it, and if it doesn't discharge a superintendent who deserves it.

We have tried today to stress the importance of this responsibility and to show you a logical way to carry it out.

Thanks for the opportunity to do so.

BOARD'S EVALUATION OF SUPERINTENDENT

MARCH 1971



(Fort Worth Public Schools)

Each board member gives the superintendent a grade of A, B, C, D, or F in various agreed-upon qualities. These grades are then plotted on a graph similar to the one above. Result is a composite board's-eye view of the superintendent's performance, indicating whether he should be rewarded, recharged, or discharged.

Desirable Qualifications for Superintendent

Please circle one letter after each qualification.

(1) Excellent health A B C D F

(2) High moral character A B C D F

(3) Pleasing personal appearance A B C D F

(4) Proper degree of confidence and idealism A B C D F

(5) Good judgment, common sense, and perception A B C D F

(6) Sound philosophy of education and its role in life A B C D F

(7) Deep-seated belief that the public schools are operated for the benefit of the children and the adults enrolled in them--not for boards, administrators, teachers, or parents A B C D F

(8) Broad administrative experience, preferably in medium- or large-size school system(s) A B C D F

(9) Varied accomplishments A B C D F

(10) Demonstrated ability to make decisions promptly and correctly A B C D F

(11) Proven ability to lead and to shoulder responsibility A B C D F

(12) Aggressive about upgrading the public school system A B C D F

(13) A pronounced interest in improving the instructional program A B C D F

(14) An open mind about the status quo and the many changes facing public education A B C D F

(15) Ability to organize effectively and to plan ahead to meet the school system's problems A B C D F

(16) Competence in business management; personnel administration; plant operation and maintenance; and personal, community, and press relations A B C D F

(17) An appreciation of the need for close working relationships with teachers and board members and the general public and agencies in a position to improve public education A B C D F

(18) Unquestioned courage, integrity, and honesty A B C D F

(19) Ability to face controversy, to remain true to convictions, and to live with a high-pressure job A B C D F

(20) Ability to delegate authority and to expedite A B C D F

(21) Ability to speak and write acceptably A B C D F